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Tiivistelmä – Referat – Abstract

According to the EU, Russia uses disinformation campaigns to destabilize European societies and undermine democratic processes. At the same time, concerns have been raised about a shift towards a 'post-truth' politics, in which the importance of facts and rationality in public discussions is declining and political contests are increasingly won by appeals to emotions, rather than fact-based arguments. These developments are seen to be harmful for democracy, which depends on an informed public. In this context, the EUvsDisinfo project was set up by the European External Action Service and tasked with exposing and 'debunking' Russian disinformation.

The research draws on the literature on theories of truth, the link between truth and democracy, and the post-truth era to critically analyze the work of EUvsDisinfo. The interest is on how the project portrays the EU through its practice of 'debunking' disinformation about it. Through a content analysis of the 'disinformation cases' published on the project's website, this thesis examines which kinds of narratives about the EU are considered disinformation, and how they are corrected. The thesis finds that EUvsDisinfo flags many common criticisms of the EU as 'pro-Kremlin' disinformation. Highly contested and political issues related to matters such as EU democracy, EU integration and sovereignty of member states are presented as forming part of 'pro-Kremlin narratives' aiming to undermine the Union.

Avainsanat – Nyckelord – Keywords
European Union, disinformation, truth, post-truth, democracy

“The truth about the EU”

An analysis of EUvsDisinfo as a response to Russian disinformation

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1. Introduction

As technological advancements have made it possible to target online media consumers personally on an unprecedented scale, as well as to boost the prevalence of particular news stories and viewpoints on online platforms, political interference has taken on new forms. While online platforms can provide possibilities for democratic participation, they have also caused various concerns, ranging from privacy issues to 'echo chambers' and 'fake news', and the impact that these issues could have on democratic processes. Particularly since reports came out of Russian interference in the 2016 US presidential elections as well as the UK's Brexit referendum, debates about disinformation have been prevalent in public discussions around the world.

For EU leaders, the problem of disinformation rose to the political agenda already in 2013-2014, when reports emerged about cyber-attacks and disinformation campaigns targeted at Ukraine during Euromaidan and later the war in Crimea, raising alert on hybrid threats around Europe. One notable characteristic about the war in Crimea was the use of attacks in the information sphere, which played a decisive role in the outcome of events. Many observers interpreted the success and efficiency of the information and psychological operations used in the war in Crimea as a sign that information attacks would become an increasingly common form of warfare.

At the same time, concerns have been raised about a shift towards a "post-truth" politics, in which the importance of facts and rationality is declining and political contests are increasingly won by appeals to emotions rather than reasoned arguments. The European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), for example, has stated that in the "post-truth era", not only is disinformation being proliferated but it is more easily believed (EPRS 2018). This, in turn, could be damaging for the legitimacy of democratic outcomes, if the issues that guide voting behavior can now be made up and 'planted' into public discussions by external and actors. The post-truth era and the polarization of political debates is seen to create fertile ground for

information attacks that seek to destabilize target societies by exacerbating divisions and distrust.

According to the EU, Russian disinformation campaigns are currently targeting European societies. A European Parliament (EP) report on strategic communication and anti-EU propaganda in 2016 stated that disinformation campaigns aim to "undermine the very notion of objective information or ethical journalism, casting all information as biased or as an instrument of political power, and which also target democratic values and interests" (EP 2016 p. 2-3). Similarly, in its Action Plan against Disinformation, the Commission reiterated concerns that "democratic processes are increasingly challenged by deliberate, large-scale, and systematic spreading of disinformation" (European Commission 2018 p. 1).

In this context, the EU has emphasized building societal resilience as a way to counter disinformation. In March 2015, the East StratCom Task Force was set up under the direction of the External Action Service (EEAS). East StratCom was given the task of addressing Russia's disinformation campaigns and raising awareness about them (EEAS 2018). One of the main projects of East StratCom is EUvsDisinfo, which collects, publishes and 'debunks' Russian disinformation campaigns said to target the EU. It also has a weekly publication, the Disinformation Review, which summarizes the main disinformation 'trends' of the week. The project maintains social media pages on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube where its publications are promoted. Even though East StratCom forms part of the EU's diplomatic service, the External Action Service (EEAS), the communications of EUvsDisinfo are directed to the Eastern Partnership countries and European citizens alike.

EUvsDisinfo forms part of a wider EU strategy on building societal resilience against disinformation and other hybrid threats. To increase societal, the Commission has called for expanding the reach of "fact-based" information about the EU (European Commission 2019 p. 5). This, according to the Commission, should be done by raising awareness of the issue of disinformation, enhancing media literacy and critical thinking skills among the European public, as well as efficient communication on the EU and its policies.

This thesis will critically analyze the work of EUvsDisinfo. In the following chapter, the background to the creation of the East StratCom Task Force and EUvsDisinfo will be introduced, beginning with the debate about hybrid threats, including disinformation, and how they should be responded to. Next, EUvsDisinfo and some of the problems associated with it will be explained in more detail. The third chapter will present the theoretical background through which the project will be analyzed. This section will focus on the concepts of 'truth' and the 'post-truth era', and the debate about the role of truth and facts in democratic politics.

The fourth chapter will present the analysis of the thesis; a content analysis of 'disinformation cases' published on EUvsDisinfo. The focus will be on cases that relate to the EU itself, and the counterarguments presented to them as 'disproof'. The data consists of 210 cases collected from the website. The research questions that will be explored in the analysis are: How does EUvsDisinfo construct an image of the EU through the exposing and 'debunking' of disinformation cases? What types of narratives about the EU are considered disinformation, and how are they disproved? The interest is on what kind of an image of the EU is presented through this project – what kind of narratives are chosen to be disproved and what kind of narratives are reinforced through the process. Finally, the wider implications of this approach to the problem of disinformation will be discussed in light of the debate on both information attacks as well as the concept of 'truth'.

2. Background to the creation of EUvsDisinfo

Since the concept of hybrid warfare has become particularly prominent in the aftermath of the annexation of Crimea in 2014, the following chapter will briefly introduce the significance of the conflict for concerns about hybrid threats in general, and information attacks in particular. Next, the concepts of hybrid threats and disinformation will be explained in more detail. The aim is not to delve too much into the debate about whether or not the term hybrid threat is appropriate in the context of the threats that the EU is facing, but to set up the context in which the EU's responses to this threat have been constructed, as well as to point to some of

the main critiques and problems associated with them, as these critiques apply to the work of EUvsDisinfo as well. Finally, the East StratCom Task Force and EUvsDisinfo project, as well as previous academic research on their work, will be introduced.

2.1. Increasing concerns about hybrid threats

Analyses on hybrid threats often highlight the importance of the conflict in Ukraine in raising alarm about the potential increase in the use of different hybrid attacks, particularly disinformation. A European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS) briefing called Ukraine Russia's "biggest testing field abroad for disinformation" (EPRS 2018b p. 3). The use of information and psychological operations in the conflict in Ukraine has been considered central to Russia's strategy and decisive for its success in the conflict. Crimea was annexed quickly and with relatively little military force, which raised concerns about the use of similar strategies in future conflicts.

Russia used information attacks in Ukraine in numerous ways. Narratives were used to create multiple illusions about the war, such as stories of Russia's non-involvement as well as its involvement on purely humanitarian grounds to protect an ethnic minority. Perhaps most importantly, narratives were central in framing events in a way that did not make the operation in Crimea seem like an occupation. Instead, the conflict was framed in terms Russia acting according to international law by protecting minorities and respecting the results of a referendum on the independence of Crimea and its accession to the Russian federation. (Pynnöniemi and Rácz 2016)

Ukraine seems to have been a kind of textbook case of coordination of military and non-military means in the digital age. The strategies used in Ukraine and their success led to a "sense of novelty" for many observers (Nordberg 2014 et al. p. 45). A NATO StratCom Centre for Excellence (2014) report described the use of information attacks along with military action in Ukraine as characteristic of "a new form of warfare" in which "the main battle space has moved from physical ground to the hearts and minds of the population in question" (n.p.). A Swedish

Defense Agency report also described a “new situation in strategic affairs” where information could be a decisive element in conflict (Granholm 2014 p. 5).

Yet others saw this sense of novelty as misleading. Charap (2015) argues that since the annexation of Crimea, “the concept of ‘hybrid war’ has emerged as a catch-all description for the new Russian threat to European security” (p. 51). The term has become so broad that it is used to explain almost any actions by Russia that are seen as threatening, and equates all of these with acts of war. These actions include “normal tools of statecraft” used to influence foreign populations, many of which are similar to influence operations of Western countries in Russia and elsewhere. In fact, Charap argues that both Russia and ‘the West’ use the term ‘hybrid warfare’ to refer to similar actions of the other, but not themselves, and project onto the term anxieties about well-known vulnerabilities. In Russia, security analysts are concerned about the fragility of the political system as well as societal cohesion, and therefore assume that the West and NATO must be trying to take advantage of these weaknesses, just as in the West, analysts assume that Russia must be trying to manipulate and exacerbate existing divisions and vulnerabilities. Similarly, Johnson (2018) claims that the concept of hybrid warfare has more to do with anxieties about the vulnerability created by the “appetites for sensational, inauthentic narratives” among Western audiences, rather than actual evidence that hybrid warfare is in fact being carried out.

With regard to the idea that events in Ukraine may signal an increase in non-traditional, non-military forms of warfare, analysts critical of the concept of hybrid war have argued that Ukraine was an exceptional case and unlikely to be repeated elsewhere in the near future. Charap (2015) for example, points to favorable conditions that made Russian information and psychological operations so successful in Ukraine, including a common language, historical and cultural ties, interpersonal connections among the populations, as well as the widespread resentment among the population of Eastern Ukraine towards the Ukrainian government (p 54).

However, while this is an important point, the argument in warnings in hybrid threats do not usually concern ideas about a repetition of the events in Ukraine. Rather, they point to a

concern about the potential use of information attacks as a way to gradually chip away at societal cohesion and stability.

2.2. Defining hybrid threats

There is no widely agreed definition for hybrid threats, and it is often used almost interchangeably with terms such as hybrid influencing, hybrid interference and even hybrid warfare. This poses a problem for analyzing the phenomena, and the term has been criticized for lacking analytical utility due to its ambiguity. In the following section, I will discuss the definition of the term both by institutions as well as within the academic debate, including the problems and critiques of the term.

The European Commission describes hybrid threats as "multidimensional, combining coercive and subversive measures, using both conventional and unconventional tools and tactics (diplomatic, military, economic, and technological) to destabilize the adversary." They are used by both state and non-state actors and are typically associated with the information, cyber, and intelligence spheres. The aim is to undermine public trust in institutions and the political system, and to challenge the "core values" of the target society in order to weaken the state and its ability to react to threats. (European Commission 2018 p. 1)

The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats (Hybrid CoE), which was established in 2017 to facilitate cooperation between the EU and NATO in this area, adds a dimension to this definition. It defines hybrid threats as "coordinated and synchronized action, that deliberately targets democratic states' and institutions' systemic vulnerabilities, through a wide range of means" with the aim of influencing decision-making and harming the target society or state (Hybrid CoE 2019, n.p.). The claim is that hybrid warfare is targeted against *democratic states* in particular.

Key to hybrid threats is "remaining below the threshold of formally declared war" (European Commission 2016 n.p.). According to Jantunen (2015), hybrid attacks aim to cause a hybrid

condition in a target society, between war and peace. Hybrid war does not "look like war", which makes it difficult to respond to, or even to agree whether it is taking place or not (ibid. p. 40-41). Furthermore, it can appear as though this state of confusion is self-inflected or a result of internal divisions (Aaltola 2017). This characteristic of remaining below the threshold of war also makes hybrid threats difficult to define, and there is much disagreement about whether hybrid threats and hybrid attacks should be considered to be methods of hybrid *warfare*, or whether the broadening of the definition of warfare in this way is inappropriate. This is one of the main issues that make the term controversial; the use of the term "war" in situations with no physical violence or military force. Renz and Smith (2015), for example, argue that the term war in hybrid war, if understood to refer to attempts to "influence public opinion or political processes" is only appropriate if it is meant "merely in the broadest metaphorical sense, similar to discourses like 'war on poverty'" (p. 12).

Aaltola et al. (2018) suggest the term "hybrid interference" to describe the current situation of Western democracies. According to the authors, Western democracies are being targeted through hybrid methods, but the use of the term "warfare" is misleading in the absence of a threat of the use of military force and can potentially escalate conflicts. Hybrid interference, in contrast, should be seen more as a form of sabotage; they are information-psychological operations that attempt to create or manipulate divisions in the target society (p. 9). However, this term, too, can be criticized for encompassing common influence attempts in world politics, aimed at interest maximizing and competition for power and resources (ibid. p. 113).

EU publications on the issue stress that Russia uses hybrid attacks, particularly disinformation, for the goal of undermining the EU's unity, destabilizing European societies and causing distrust towards democratic processes and institutions by "making democratic actors, systems and values appear less attractive through a number of overt and covert instruments" (EPRS 2018b p. 1). The Commission has stressed that disinformation undermines trust in institutions and the media, and is a threat to democracy, which depends on public debates and well-informed citizens (European Commission 2018a p. 1). Teija Tiilikainen, Director of the Hybrid European Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats, argues that the legitimacy of elections is at stake if issues that guide people's voting choices turn out to be manipulated by outside actors

(cited in Yle 2020). The idea of 'planting' mistrust from outside is a central theme in the literature on hybrid threats.

While hybrid attacks are often thought to target democratic institutions, it has also been argued that democratic institutions in themselves make target states particularly vulnerable. In a report analyzing the threats of what they call "hybrid interference" to liberal democracies, Aaltola et al. (2018) argue that many characteristics of liberal democracies, meant to protect freedoms of individuals, may also protect hybrid attackers from being exposed. This is particularly visible with regard to information attacks; freedom of the press and the open information environment make liberal democracies an easy target for information interference because all viewpoints must be tolerated. This makes it easy for hostile actors to maintain a presence in the information sphere. Therefore, the value of pluralism and the competition between interest groups in the democratic system make democracies more vulnerable to hybrid threats (ibid. p. 32). Open political competition means there will always be some level of political conflict, and therefore, some division that can be exacerbated or manipulated to cause tensions in the target society. Hybrid attacks can therefore be used to manipulate the ability of the target society to manage divisions. By targeting societal cohesion and solidarity, which are central for balancing conflicting interests in a democracy and essential for democratic governance, a target society can be made more vulnerable to other attacks, such as influence attempts.

Similarly, Sillanpää (2015) argues that the norm of accountability and transparency in the West with regard to political communication, while essential for democracy, "does not come without tactical costs" as it can be used malevolently to undermine public trust in institutions and to undermine credibility of leaders as well as decision-making processes. This is highlighted in the digital age, in which credibility can be lost much more quickly and easily. Furthermore, he argues that the constant flow of information makes the information sphere seem "fragmented and complicated", making it more difficult to make sense of things, particularly if an adversary is intentionally creating distractions through "informational noise". Sillanpää argues for strategic communication as a remedy for this; Western governments should communicate

strong and unifying narratives which could put "data fragments in comprehensible order" and help make "positive sense" of the world. (Sillanpää 2015 n.p.)

2.3. Disinformation

The European Parliamentary Research Service, which publishes research to guide EU policymaking, defines disinformation as false information that is deliberatively deceptive, and *serves a political purpose*. Therefore, it differs from misinformation (false information in general) and misleading information not only in that it is deliberate, but because it forms part of a wider scheme of strategic influence (EPRS 2018b p. 1). Importantly, then, disinformation is defined according to its aims; unlike false information in general, disinformation has a particular, subversive aim.

Problematically, in some EU documents on the topic, the terms disinformation and propaganda are used interchangeably (e.g. EP 2016). Pynnöniemi (2015) explains the difference between these two terms: similarly to propaganda, disinformation serves a particular objective, but this is usually simply to deceive or confuse, rather than to consolidate adherence to a certain idea; the aim is to cause chaos rather than order. It is also important to distinguish disinformation from another term that it is often conflated with, "fake news". As Bennet and Livingston explain, fake news tends to refer to more sporadic falsehoods or even simple mistakes. Disinformation, on the other hand, is conceptualized as "more systematic disruptions of authoritative information flows" (p. 123).

While Pynnöniemi uses the term "strategic deception" rather than disinformation to describe Russia's actions against the EU in the information sphere, the phenomenon she describes is the same; the spreading multiple narratives and contradictory information in order to cause confusion. Unlike propaganda, then, the goal of disinformation (or strategic deception) is to create multiple different and contradictory "versions of reality", thereby undermining trust in all information in general (p. 14). Similarly, Jantunen (2015) argues that the aim is not

necessarily to convince the audience of any particular narrative – the impact of disinformation is in the "cumulative effect" of distrust created by the prevalence of conflicting narratives which can cause distrust, frustration and confusion (p. 30). Writing about disinformation from a war studies perspective, Jantunen argues that the utility of disinformation lies in the fact that setting the terms of an argument guides the direction of public discussion in the target state of issues of strategic importance.

Disinformation is seen to be a central tool for hybrid attacks, as it can be used to cause confusion and distrust. As was discussed above, the key characteristics of hybrid threats are targeting a society's ability to work together, sowing divisions, and weakening the capacity to respond to those same attacks – and thus creating a vicious cycle of distrust and destabilization. Disinformation can serve these goals by spreading narratives that push public debate as well as voter behavior in desired directions.

The European Commission has emphasized that the systematic use of disinformation for hybrid attacks is easier than ever because of technological change that has created "personalized information spheres" and echo chambers in which existing biases are amplified. The concern is that information consumed online is not subject to the same rules on "impartiality, pluralism, cultural diversity, harmful content, advertising and sponsored content" that traditional media is (European Commission 2018a p. 1). The online media environment has thus created a favorable environment for "mass online disinformation campaigns" seeking to exacerbate divisions and societal tensions, both among the public, and between the state and the public (ibid. p. 2). The Commission has also raised concerns that disinformation may "diminish trust in science and empirical evidence" (ibid p. 2). As will be discussed in the theoretical background section of this thesis, the idea that the prevalence of disinformation has caused a break from an otherwise truth-based politics is very contested, but it is important to note that these concerns are voiced in various EU documents and are at the heart of the concern about disinformation.

As with hybrid attacks, there is some confusion over the definition of disinformation, as well as its connection to hybrid threats or hybrid warfare. Disinformation is often used almost interchangeably with the concepts of information influencing and even information warfare.

The EP and Commission documents from 2016-2019 related to disinformation which were read for this thesis do not name the current situation of the EU as being the target of information warfare. However, in the literature on hybrid threats and disinformation, the term is sometimes used to describe a situation in which disinformation campaigns are used for the goals described above; to weaken and divide societies and to undermine their ability to respond to such attacks (e.g. Jantunen 2015).

As with hybrid warfare, the concept of information warfare has been the subject of much criticism. An article from Politiikasta.fi asked several Finnish academics about the debate on information war. While the discussion was about information attacks in the context of Finland in particular, the responses bring up concerns that relate to the debate on a European as well as global scale. Pauli Kettunen argues that the term 'information warfare' is dangerous because the imagery of war may lead to an increase in state powers to determine what is considered real or correct information, and to regulate information. The term also implies a state of emergency, which could be used to constrain civil rights and freedoms. Noora Kotilainen raises the concern that the framing of the issue as information warfare could lead to a 'totalization' of public discussion, whereby articulating certain opinions or narratives is considered participating in an information war. Similarly, Heikki Patomäki criticizes the term for securitization and argues that defining particular arguments or perspectives as information warfare means rejecting not only the possibility that there could be any truth to such arguments, but also any possibility of engaging in dialogue with those presenting such arguments. (all cited in Politiikasta.fi 2016)

These criticisms are very relevant to the arguments made in the literature on disinformation. Jantunen (2015), for example, claims that domestic actors, whether willingly or not, participate in information warfare by spreading disinformation, for example when sharing posts or articles on social media that form part of narratives used in the information warfare. Thus, information warfare is not something only imposed from the outside, but also domestic actors are seen to participate in it if they share ideas that are associated with narratives used in information attacks. Similarly, the European Commission has stated that disinformation campaigns are used

by both foreign and domestic actors (European Commission 2018a p. 2). This is significant because it implies a securitization of public debate.

Securitization refers to a process in which a particular issue is defined and constructed as a security threat. In order to make an issue a security threat in the minds of the audience, an issue is framed in a way that communicates to the audience a sense of urgency and vulnerability, thus turning the issue into a perceived security threat. This, then, makes it easier to justify and legitimize actions taken to counter the threat. In short, a securitizing speech act changes the state of affairs from a state of security to insecurity and in that sense "remodels the context in which it occurs." (Balzacq 2011 p. 11)

For securitization, the audience is central – the audience has to be convinced of the threat in order to legitimize actions taken to counter it. Securitization theory is therefore interested in the "performative dimension" of security and security threats. Here, the interest is on the "abductive power" of language, symbols, cultural meanings etc. In this sense, securitization is not about "an objective reality" but rather about the ways in which linguistic depictions shape our perceptions of threats (Balzacq 2011 p. 12). Securitization theory offers an important perspective for examining the discussion around information warfare and disinformation campaigns especially since the threat is wholly linguistic; arguments about information warfare typically associate particular opinions and narratives with a security threat.

Another issue complicating the discussion around the threat of disinformation is that it is unclear how exactly it differs from "normal" influence attempts in world politics. Much of the scholarship would argue that the difference is in whether the effects this engagement are meant to be destabilizing; however, from the literature on hybrid and information attacks, it seems that disinformation tends to be associated with authoritarian governments only. For example, the US war on Iraq is not usually named in the literature on disinformation. The research tends to present the world as divided into democratic states characterized by freedom, and authoritarian states that aim to destabilize those democratic states.

Aaltola (2017), for example, argues that recent elections both in the US and in Europe have shown "an emerging practice whereby autocracies meddle in democratic elections by hacking

data, scandalizing it through leaks, and amplifying the effect by creating intense cognitive flows of disinformation and distrust across social media" (p. 2). In this context, he argues, data is now similar in terms of geopolitical importance to control over natural resources. "Data and content flow can be weaponized" due to their potential in manipulating people's behavior (p. 3). Aaltola presents a model of election meddling, in which spreading disinformation is step one. During this stage, information is spread in a way that is intended to weaken trust in governments, media and other institutions. Besides trust, also cohesion of society is attacked by causing or exemplifying existing divisions. In this way, disinformation "lays the groundwork for further stages" (p. 3).

While much of the criticism on the idea of disinformation and information warfare points out that the phenomena is nothing new or a normal part of geopolitics (e.g. Renz and Smith 2015), this point is usually acknowledged by researchers writing about these threats. Rather than claiming that the use of disinformation is something completely new, many authors point to the fact that information tools are evolving and moving increasingly into the digital sphere, which increases their reach and speed of action. The disagreement has more to do with the impact this may have and to what extent this is just the evolution of forms of public discussion, rather than forms of manipulation.

Aaltola et. al. (2018) claim that while information influencing has always been a part of world politics, what is new about the current situation are the possibilities brought by technological advancements, as well as the societal change which is often referred to as "post-truth", which has revealed the vulnerabilities of democracy to the manipulation of information, and through it, public opinion. The term post-truth will be discussed in more detail in the theoretical background, but from the perspective of hybrid threats and disinformation, the concept is important because it is often used to explain why contemporary societies are seen to be so susceptible to manipulation attempts.

The concerns over disinformation are often linked to concerns about social media and its effects on democracy. Social media is increasingly connected to "political awareness and patterns of trust" – people get much of their information from there and therefore also voting

and other behavior is partly shaped through the content on these platforms (Aaltola 2017 p. 3). Recently a key concern with the wider impact of the internet on democracy has been with the business models of social media companies which host such a significant amount of information flows. Because appeals to emotions, particularly negative ones, are very effective for engaging viewers and readers, there is an incentive for sensationalist or polarizing, or even false content. There is a concern that this attention-based business model is particularly susceptible to manipulation attempts (Nye 2018). In the "fragmented information sphere" in which much of what we see is designed to confirm "existing cognitive biases", divisive issues are easier to exploit (Aaltola 2017 p. 3).

2.4. East StratCom and EUvsDisinfo

The concerns about the spread of disinformation campaigns led to the establishment of the East StratCom Task Force in 2015. The Task Force was mandated with the following three tasks: communication and promotion of EU policies in the Eastern Neighborhood countries; strengthening the media environment both in the Eastern Neighborhood as well as member states; and strengthening the EU's capacity to detect and respond to Russian disinformation campaigns. Promotion of EU policies is done mainly through strategic communication campaigns. Strengthening the media environment includes supporting media freedom and independent media by financing and training of individual journalists. The EUvsDisinfo project was set up to address the task of raising awareness of the issue of disinformation and exposing and debunking pro-Kremlin narratives. (European Commission 2016)

A number of EU documents commend the work of EUvsDisinfo, often citing the high number of disinformation cases that it has exposed and disproved. However, the quality of the work has rarely been addressed, as the effectiveness of the project has mostly been expressed in terms of quantity of disinformation cases 'disproven'. The Commission, for example, comments in its Action Plan against Disinformation that the East StratCom Task Force has "analyzed and put the spotlight on over 4,500 examples of disinformation … uncovering numerous disinformation

narratives, raising awareness and exposing the tools, techniques and intentions of disinformation campaigns" (European Commission 2018c p. 6). Similarly, in a report about the EU's responses to hybrid threats, the Commission highlighted the work of the East StratCom, claiming that it had "spearheaded work on forecasting, tracking and tackling disinformation" and that EUvsDisinfo has "significantly raised awareness about the impact of Russian disinformation" (European Commission 2018b p. 2). This report, too, goes on to mention the high number of individual disinformation the website has covered to show its success, giving the impression that it is very effective.

Despite the mostly positive views on EUvsDisinfo's work that is evident particularly from Commission reports, in 2016 the EP criticized EUvsDisinfo for the tone used in its publications. In a resolution on strategic communication, the EP demanded that the Task Force adhere by the standards of quality journalism and that the Disinformation Review be "drafted in an appropriate manner, without using offensive language or value judgements" (EP 2016). Overall, however, the EP has been very supportive of the project and has recommended increasing its funding. But the criticism is interesting because as will be discussed below, despite being a part of the EU's diplomatic service, EUvsDisinfo does tend to use very judgmental language. Furthermore, the claim that EUvsDisinfo should adhere to standards of journalism shows the confusion in what exactly the role of EUvsDisinfo is, as it is not supposed to be a journalistic outlet.

A controversy broke out in 2018, when East StratCom was sued by three Dutch news outlets which claimed they had been unfairly targeted and blamed EUvsDisinfo for interfering with freedom of speech and media pluralism. The news outlets were categorized as "disinformation outlets" in the database. The issue was also brough to the Dutch parliament which passed a motion to call on its government to demand the Task Force be shut down. Yet at the EU level, the Dutch government continued to support it and voted together with the rest of the member states to increase its budget (Birnbaum 2018). After this, EUvsDisinfo stopped using the label "disinformation outlet" for the websites where disinformation cases have appeared. The case brought up important questions about the role of EUvsDisinfo, and the EU by association, in legitimizing some narratives as truthful, and de-legitimizing others as disinformation.

A disclaimer was recently added to the website, which is now visible both on the front page of the Disinformation Database as well as next to all disinformation cases, which states:

> *"Cases in the EUvsDisinfo database focus on messages in the international information space that are identified as providing a partial, distorted, or false depiction of reality and spread key pro-Kremlin messages. This does not necessarily imply, however, that a given outlet is linked to the Kremlin or editorially pro-Kremlin, or that it has intentionally sought to disinform. EUvsDisinfo publications do not represent an official EU position, as the information and opinions expressed are based on media reporting and analysis of the East StratCom Task Force.[1]"*

The addition of this disclaimer is interesting for multiple reasons. Firstly, EUvsDisinfo now states that it includes in its database not only disinformation as defined as false or intentionally misleading but also "partial" depictions of reality, presumably meaning that they show only one side of an issue. Secondly, EUvsDisinfo has very much softened its practice from initially listing the sources of disinformation as "disinformation outlets" to stressing that just because an outlet is cited on its website, does not mean that it is pro-Kremlin or even that "it has intentionally sought to disinform." This seems contradictory, as one of the key characteristics of disinformation has been said to be the intention of disinforming. Finally, the website now calls its publications information *and opinions,* whereas previously it has been claimed that the project simply checks facts and exposes disinformation (see EEAS 2018).

2.5. Previous research on EUvsDisinfo

So far, the project has not attracted much attention among scholars. Glorio (2018) analyzes EUvsDisinfo through propaganda analysis and the concept of hegemonic narratives, with a

[1] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/disinformation-cases/

focus on the role that fact-checking organizations can have in the political debate. As she points out, while EUvsDisinfo is not strictly considered a fact-checking organization, this role is very much implied in different EU documents regarding its work, as well as the EEAS website. Therefore, while not totally accurate, the comparison to fact-checking organizations is appropriate. She argues that fact-checking as a means of counter-propaganda can itself be used as a channel for propaganda, especially when used for strategic communication of states. Through a content analysis of publications from the Disinformation Digest publications (now called the Disinformation Review), which are weekly summaries published about the main disinformation 'trends', she argues that the project can be seen as a platform for counter-propaganda, which presents a "heavily framed reality" of Russia and its actions towards the EU (p. 58). She concludes that "Western war on Russian propaganda has the risk of becoming a two-sided propaganda war" (p. 63).

Wagnsson and Hellman (2018) analyze EUvsDisinfo in terms of its implications on the credibility of the EU as a normative power, meaning an actor that uses its influence through setting and spreading of norms in the international system, rather than through force. Their paper compares the rhetoric of Disinformation Digest publications to High Representative Mogherini's speeches relating to Russia from the same time period. They conclude that while Mogherini emphasizes cooperation and dialogue with Russia, presenting it as an important partner, EUvsDisinfo takes an antagonistic and confrontational approach. It represents Russia in an explicitly negative way, constructing it as a threat and clearly contrasting it with the positive and ethical values it associates with the EU. They conclude that this shift in the EU's external communication has "led to the EU losing reflexivity and normative power", as instead of engaging in critical and constructive dialogue, the EU is engaging in the kind of aggressive "othering" that it criticizes Russia for (p. 1161). This can be seen, for example, in the tone of "sarcasm, irony or ridicule" with which the Russian narratives are presented in the Reviews (p. 1170).

Wagnsson and Hellman's analysis therefore shows a clear divide between EEAS communications; while the High Representative favors constructive dialogue, the East StratCom Task Force, through EUvsDisinfo, is taking a very different approach. This, they claim, has led to

a “double track communication within the EU”, where different parts of its organizations are sending different and even contradictory messages (p. 1171). This brings up an important challenge in analyzing EUvsDisinfo: it is unclear exactly whose voice it represents. The website claims that it does not represent an official EU position, as it is only exposing disinformation, not publishing its own views or opinions (although as discussed above, the disclaimer on the website has recently been changed and now states that the website also presents opinions). EUvsDisinfo is a project of the EU’s diplomatic service (EEAS), and run by the East StratCom Task Force, which is a unit explicitly tasked with strategic communication of the EU (EEAS 2018). Furthermore, it is quite clear from reading the Disinformation Review that it is not only about exposing disinformation or even projecting a positive view of the EU, but it also constructs a particular view of Russia. Therefore, I agree with Wagnsson and Hellman’s decision to consider EUvsDisinfo “a strategic vehicle for EU messaging” (p. 1166) and will do the same in my own analysis.

A yet more troubling piece on EUvsDisinfo was published by Hutchings and Tolz (2020), who conclude that the project is “in danger of becoming a source of disinformation itself” (n.p.). They analyze cases on the website related to COVID-19, comparing the original sources where they appeared to how they are presented in the EUvsDisinfo summaries. The paper finds that many of these were clearly misrepresented and taken out of context. They show numerous examples where the original article has cited a claim, and this claim is then presented as an argument of the article itself, even where it has clearly not been endorsed. They even find one example where an article “clearly ridiculing a whole series of international conspiracy theories regarding the origins of coronavirus” is flagged by EUvsDisinfo as promoting such conspiracy theories. Furthermore, Hutchings and Tolz claim that even where the original articles can legitimately be considered disinformation, they are presented in an “inflationary manner”, exaggerating their claims to make them seem even more outrageous.

Furthermore, Hutchings and Tolz criticize EUvsDisinfo’s way of describing all the disinformation cases with the vague term “pro-Kremlin narratives”, which is used for anything from state-funded media to small, independent websites which cannot be traced to “Russian state structures”. They argue that EUvsDisinfo shows clear signs of a “profound misunderstanding of

how the media in neo-authoritarian systems such as Russia's work" and a common, mistaken belief about the extent of the Kremlin's control over media and communication. This, according to the authors, is commonly overlooked in the information war narrative, which tends to exaggerate the ability of the Kremlin to control public discourse in Russia. However, it should be noted that strictly speaking, EUvsDisinfo does not claim that the sources of disinformation stories are necessarily controlled by the Kremlin, but that they advance the same goals as the Kremlin.

Finally, Hutchings and Tolz argue that there is a tendency of EUvsDisinfo overstating the significance of the sources of the disinformation cases presented on the website; they often come from relatively small websites with small followings, yet are presented as though they were the mainstream view of Russian media in general.

Hutchings and Tolz conclude that EUvsDisinfo cases are often misleading because they tend to misrepresent the original articles. Hutchings and Tolz identify both omission of information, as well as "blatant distortion" of the arguments made. While the study only considers EUvsDisinfo cases related to COVID-19, its findings are significant, because the project "bears the EU stamp of credibility" and is therefore increasingly a source for numerous news outlets publishing alarming accounts of Russia's spreading of disinformation about COVID-19. The authors argue that EUvsDisinfo is harming the credibility of the EU "as an evidence-driven policymaker". Furthermore, the authors claim that this type of communication risks escalating tensions on both sides and provides "valuable ammunition to Russian state media counterclaims that it is the EU itself which produces disinformation" which may lead to a "self-renewable dynamic" of accusations and rebuttals. They argue that while there is a need within the EU to research and understand disinformation cases, this work should be done much more carefully and professionally than is currently the case with EUvsDisinfo. (Hutchings and Tolz 2020 n.p.)

3. Theoretical background

The European Parliamentary Research Service warned the EP in 2018 of a "truth decay", characterized by "a growing disagreement about facts; blurred lines between opinion and fact; increasing influence of opinion over fact; and declining trust in formerly respected sources of factual information" (EPRS 2018a p. 1). The report predicted that the decline of rationality and increase of "importance of emotions in political culture" were likely to continue. This situation was defined as "post-truth".

The EP has raised similar concerns about this phenomena and different aspects of it in numerous communications. In a 2016 resolution on countering 'anti-EU propaganda', the EP, although without using the term post-truth, raised concerns about the increasing susceptibility of EU citizens to disinformation. The resolution states that:

> *"the financial crisis and the advance of new forms of digital media have posed serious challenges for quality journalism, leading to a decrease in critical thinking among audiences, thus making them more susceptible to disinformation and manipulation"* (EP 2016 p. 3).

It is not stated how this decrease in critical thinking has been measured, and presumably it has not been. However, this passage raises an interesting point about the EU discussion on post-truth and responses to it; the EP has made a connection between economic insecurity and the poor state of financing of media on the one hand, and the phenomena of 'post-truth' in the sense of distrust in official information on the other. Yet with regard to solutions to the problem, the focus seems to be on countering disinformation and promoting positive narratives about the EU. The Commission has emphasized the importance of raising awareness of disinformation and improving societal resilience through "empowering citizen and civil society and ensuring fact-based communications on the EU", so that citizens would have a "better understanding of the impact of the EU on their daily life" (European Commission 2019 p. 5-6).

As will be explained below, many academics have raised similar concerns about the emergence of a post-truth politics, with various conceptualizations of the phenomena. However, these claims have also been met with much criticism. Perhaps most significantly, they are criticized for reducing the debate over complex issues and a condition of serious social insecurity to a simple true vs. false debate.

Since much of the justification for the need for the EUvsDisinfo project centers around the argument that disinformation is causing confusion over facts and truth among the European public, a closer look at the concept of truth is in order. The theoretical background explored in the following chapter will introduce the conceptual framework through which the project will be analyzed. It will begin by discussing different theories of truth, and the relationship of truth to concepts such as facts, objectivity and rationality. These concepts are regularly mentioned in the post-truth debate, yet are often overlooked and sometimes even treated as synonyms. The point of the theoretical background is not to attempt a comprehensive account of truth theories, but rather to point to some of the main problems in theorizing truth and the validation of truth claims. Each of the broad categories of theories of truth include a wide range of viewpoints, all of which cannot be dealt with here. However, hopefully the chapter will shed light on the difficulty with the very attempt to define truth and evaluate different types of truth claims, as well as with attempts to fix the so-called post-truth problem with more "fact-based" information.

Secondly, this chapter will discuss theories relating to the link between truth and democracy. This is central, because as has been explained in the previous chapter, the EU has justified its responses to disinformation in terms of the importance of trustworthy information for democracy and democratic decision-making. The tension between the freedom of information and participation in public discussion on the one hand, and the need for rational and efficient decision-making on the other, is particularly important. Finally, having mapped out the theoretical background, the debate on the post-truth phenomena will be discussed in relation to these concepts and issues.

3.1 Theories of truth

One significant difficulty for conceptualizing the 'post-truth' era is that there is no consensus on truth itself. The meaning of truth may seem rather intuitive, and in many cases possibly as simple as the most traditional view, the so-called 'correspondence theory' claims: truth is a relation of correspondence between a proposition (or sentence/belief) to reality. In practice, however, comparing a truth claim and the facts in the world is rarely such a simple task. The question of exactly what the correspondence theory means in practice remains elusive, and theories of truth remain at odds with this question.

The correspondence theory is often associated with realism. Realism sees truth through *bivalence*; an objective world exists independently of our propositions or beliefs about it, and our propositions are either objectively true or objectively false, depending on whether they correspond to reality. Truth is seen as wholly dependent on the objective world that exists outside of our views, thoughts, or propositions about it (Prado 2009 p. 2). Realism also claims that truth is *transcendent*, meaning all propositions are either true or false regardless of whether we know it. One of the most prominent contemporary realists, John Searle, sums up the realist view on truth as being simply an "accurate depiction of what is the case" (ibid p. 3).

However, while intriguing in its simplicity, the realist view takes many things for granted. The decision of which facts are most relevant in each case is often a matter of interpretation. While in some domains or everyday events it may be easy to do this, in more complex cases, not all propositions are verifiable. Therefore, this simple procedure of checking the relation of correspondence applies only to some cases in some subject-matters, where we can clearly identify the corresponding fact.

Realism has also been criticized for its lack of attention to the fallibility of knowledge and our ability to accurately represent reality. Realism presupposes a "semantically closed language", where the meaning, and therefore also truth-value, of sentences can always be objectively and reliably assessed (Fuller 2018 p. 136).

Idealists came up with very different conceptualizations of truth, which stressed the role of ideas and knowledge in defining truth and truth-value. Idealism is not interested in the external, objective reality outside of human consciousness. This is because all knowledge about reality is always constrained by language and the limits of human consciousness; therefore, we have no unmediated access to an objective reality. So, while realists start with the assumption that people are able to represent the objective world accurately through their propositions about it, idealists claim that they can only represent *ideas* about the world, not the world itself. Therefore, truth is ontologically something very different from that of the realist view. For idealists, reality is "something like a collection of beliefs", and therefore, criteria for truth claims can only come from other beliefs. (Young 2018 n.p.)

Idealism is often associated with the coherence theory of truth. One of the early advocates of the theory was Hegel, who critiqued the realist approach to truth as unable to account for the nature of knowledge, and insisted that there was a clear separation between consciousness (which includes knowledge and experience) and reality. Reality is outside the mind, and knowledge is inside the mind, and the two will always be to some extent fundamentally separated from each other, and there is always the possibility of reality being distorted in knowledge. He saw language as a constitutive part of reality, and the contingency of language means that reality as we know it is itself contingent (Shomali 2010 p. 134-135). It is not possible to step outside of language and sociopolitical context and acquire a perspective "from which a final account of society/reality is possible" (Shomali 2010 p. 134). In Hegel's view, given that the realm of experience and knowledge is "self-enclosed", unable to capture the totality of reality, the correspondence theory fails to provide any certainty about how true statements could be validated in practice. (Shomali 2010 p. 12-13)

According to the coherence theory of truth, a true statement must be coherent with a wider set of propositions or beliefs. Truth, then, is what is reached when this 'criteria' of coherence has been fulfilled (Shomali 2010). As the coherence theory determines the truth-value of a proposition in terms of its coherence with a larger whole, propositions are not seen as either true or false but in terms of their "degree of truth", depending on to what degree they correspond to a whole. So, in contrast with the idea proposed in the correspondence theory,

truth is not a relationship of correspondence of *individual propositions* to *individual facts* that can be observed in the world. Instead, truth is about "how beliefs are related to each other"; it is a relationship *between propositions* (Glanzberg 2018 n.p.).

While there are differences among coherence theorists, what they have in common is the idea that the truth-value of propositions is determined by other propositions, as opposed to 'objective facts.' In a way, this is also a rather intuitive way to think about truth and probably applies to much of everyday thinking about truth; in most cases, we would not even attempt to check whether the information we receive corresponds to any objective facts. Instead, we tend to get information from secondary sources and believe things when they seem to make sense based on what we already know. However, this is inadequate for defining the nature of truth, and can only account for a plausible explanation for why we believe the things that we believe.

A common criticism of the coherence theory is that just because we cannot know whether a proposition corresponds to reality, that should not be taken to mean that it in fact does not. But the coherence theory does not necessarily imply a rejection of the existence of an objective world; rather, the argument is that we have no unmediated access to it, because humans "cannot 'get outside' our set of beliefs and compare propositions to objective facts", and therefore, have to rely on experiences, beliefs and obeservations (Young 2018 n.p.). So, while an objective world may exist, it does not follow that our knowledge can mirror it. Coherence theorists reject the basic tenets of realism about truth, according to which all propositions are either true or false, regardless of whether their truth-value can be known. Not every proposition coheres with a set of beliefs, and if it cannot be known whether a proposition is true or not, then calling it truth would be nonsensical (ibid.).

While early versions of the coherence theory tended to view the nature of truth simply as the logical consistency of propositions, this view has largely been abandoned, as it lends itself to the easy criticism that even false beliefs could make up a coherent set of beliefs. Contemporary coherence theorists defend their view on epistemological rather than ontological grounds, and specify that the set of beliefs or propositions against which the coherence of a truth claim is evaluated should be one that has been reached through inquiry (Young 2018). But as Young

points out, they cannot account for which system of beliefs to measure truth against without conceding that objective facts do play some role, and conceding this would unravel the whole theory, which claims that truth is about beliefs, not objective facts. But if taken only as an epistemological claim, then the coherence theory does not actually challenge the correspondence theory. Coherence theory cannot challenge the ontological claim of the correspondence theory, unless it is to argue that "propositions cannot correspond to objective facts, not merely that they cannot be known to correspond" (ibid.). This, as an ontological claim would be unconvincing, yet without it the coherence theory does not really say anything about the nature of truth, only about our ways of validating truth claims.

Another theory of truth that emerged to challenge the realist view is pragmatism. Perhaps even more than the coherence theory, pragmatic theories of truth are difficult to generalize and sometimes contradict each other. However, they are united in their focus on the *practical value* of truth. In contrast to the correspondence theory, which views truth "as a static relation" between propositions and reality, pragmatic theories view truth as a function of, for example, problem-solving, scientific inquiry, everyday conversations, moral judgements etc. (Capps 2019 n.p.)

Similarly to coherence theorists, pragmatists focus on the epistemic practices related to truth; how we come to consider things as true and how that impacts and guides the direction of inquiry (Capps 2019 n.p.). Similarly, pragmatists see truth as what is found at "the end of inquiry"; truth is what we have at a point where inquiry has been satisfied (Glanzberg 2018 n.p.). They have criticized correspondence theory and realist views for not accounting for the value and role of truth and why truth should be pursued. But as pointed out before, the correspondence theory is not concerned with epistemology, while the pragmatist view of truth is very centered on epistemic practices. Unlike in correspondence theory, which sees truth as a relation, for pragmatism truth is about function and utility. Pragmatists do not necessarily reject correspondence theory outright, but critique it as "cut off from practical matters of experience, belief, and doubt" (Glanzberg 2018 n.p.).

As to the ontology of truth, pragmatists have criticized the correspondence theory as obscure because it depends "on an abstract (and unverifiable) relationship between a proposition and how things 'really are'" (Capps 2019 n.p.). Pragmatists tend to be skeptical of the metaphysical character of the correspondence theory and realism. Hilary Putnam, for example, has critiqued metaphysical realism for assuming a kind of "God's Eye Point of View", which is beyond the actual capacity of human beings to fully comprehend and explain reality in its totality. Putnam differentiates between different *kinds* of truth; correspondence theory may hold true for some kinds of truths, but not others. Not all truths are true because of correspondence. If they were, then there could be no truth in ethical statements, for example, because they do not correspond to any uncontestable fact that would objectively prove them to be true. Putnam's view is therefore pluralist; different kinds of truth are true for different kinds of reasons. In this way, he attempted to avoid the abstractness of the correspondence theory while still maintaining that truth itself is objective. So, the correspondence should not be generalized as a universal measure of truth, because there are other ways of being true, without a relation of correspondence to point to. (Capps 2019 n.p.)

Similarly as Putnam, Richard Rorty rejected the idea that knowledge could ever perfectly mirror reality. He took the conclusion from this further, claiming that the correspondence theory should therefore be abandoned altogether. As Young (2018) argues, this view "seems to conflate truth with its justification, suggesting that if a claim meets contextual standards of acceptability then it also counts as true". Rorty stressed the implications of language for the concept of truth. As he points out, we explain reality through language, and "only descriptions of the world can be true or false" (cited in Shomali 2010 p. 136). In other words, reality itself is not either true or false. While this may seem like common sense, it has important implications for how we think about truth. Truth, to Rorty, is not a "constitutive part" of reality (ibid p. 136).

These traditional views on truth were upset in the mid-20th century with the emergence of the so-called postmodern turn in philosophy and social science. Postmodern views on truth are often associated with relativism. Relativists pointed to the multitude of contradictory and even incompatible ways that different societies have come up with for conceptualizing truth and concluded that there "can be no framework-independent vantage point" from which truth

claims can be assessed; truth is always related to a particular epistemic system (Baghramian and Carter 2018 n.p.). Therefore, there is no absolute, universal truth, but rather many truths, which depend on perspective, conceptual frameworks, scientific paradigms, etc. For relativists, reality does not exist independently of our ways of interpreting it, but rather is constantly being constructed by the claims we make (Glanzberg 2018). Unlike the realist view, in which truth is seen as a relation to the real world, or the idealist view, in which it is a relationship between ideas, for relativism, truth is "wholly linguistic"; it does not exist beyond language (Prado 2009 p. 2). Due to the multitude of equally valid ways to produce and validate truth claims, relativists consider there to be "no meta-justification of our evaluative and normative systems" (Baghramian and Carter 2018 n.p.).

Relativists also tend to view knowledge production and claims of objective truths as inherently tied to power and ideology, and the idea of single, universal truth as a tool for legitimizing and perpetuating societal power structures. In fact, relativism is often defended on normative grounds, as the most tolerant and open-minded approach in a world characterized by vast diversity. (Baghramian and Carter 2018).

The influence of Michel Foucault in this 'postmodern turn' can hardly be overstated. Foucault is among the most cited authors in the social sciences. Foucault conceptualized truth as a social construction that was essentially tied to power, and saw truth in terms of truth regimes. His power/knowledge concept emphasized the need to focus on explaining how truths are constructed and the effect that they have on relations of power. Rather than theorizing the ontology of truth, Foucault pointed to the ways that the concept of truth is used to organize society in particular ways. Therefore, more important than the philosophical debate on the nature of truth was the investigation into the power effects of the ability to produce truths. In this view, "truth is wholly discursive and, as discursive, neither succeeds nor fails in depicting what is the case in extralinguistic reality" (Prado 2006 p. 3). He used the concept "regimes of truth" to describe the dominant forms of knowledge and authority that determine what is considered to be the truth in a given place and time. Truth, for Foucault, is always relative to the particular truth regime that it has been produced in. (Prado 2006)

Relativism is often criticized for incoherence. The most obvious incoherency is perhaps its self-refutation (if there is no truth then the claim that there is no truth is also not true; and if true claims are only true in their particular epistemic frameworks then the relativist view on truth is also only true within the relativist framework). It can also be seen as 'explaining away' complex debates; the vast diversity of opinions, cultures and worldviews, as well as the fallibility of human knowledge are taken by relativists to mean that a single, universal standard for truth cannot exist. But this can also be seen as an easy way to avoid the question of the nature of truth altogether.

While the ontological views of relativism may be incoherent, relativism offers a useful way to think about epistemology, and the epistemological claim that knowledge is contingent and socially constructed has been adopted by many other approaches. But the problem with the relativist view is that is that it endorses not only epistemological relativism, but ontological relativism. From observing the contingent, ever-changing nature of knowledge it concludes that reality must also be equally contingent, as it is produced by knowledge.

A central counterargument to the relativist outlook on truth is that other approaches, too, acknowledge that our ways of knowing about the world, including in the scientific domain, are not value-neutral or objective. But while science and knowledge are always tied to historical contingencies, and this affects our knowledge of the world, it does not *determine* it (Glanzber 2018). From the perspective of critical realism, for example, the correspondence of truth claims to reality is seen metaphorically. Adopting ontological realism but a relativist epistemology, critical realism asserts that an objective world exists independent of our knowledge about it, yet knowledge about it is always "socially produced, contextual and fallible", and therefore, relative. However, despite this "interpretative pluralism", claims to truth should be judged through judgmental rationalism, which implies rational development of scientific practices and openness to learning and opposing viewpoints or evidence (Patomäki 2002 p. 8-9).

Theories of truth depend much on what assumptions about the capacity or lack thereof that people have for acquiring knowledge of external reality. Yet truth theories tend to be quite ambiguous, and it is often not said explicitly which aspect of the concept of truth is being

discussed or debated; namely the nature of truth, or the standards for evaluating truth claims. This is a central point made by Kirkman (1992), who criticizes the philosophical debate on truth for vagueness and ambiguity, claiming that writers on the subject tend not to be specific about what kind of questions about truth they are addressing. Different theories of truth focus on different questions about truth, and do not necessarily contradict with other theories as much as is often thought. They are simply writing about different aspects and issues about truth, but because writers often fail to "make clear what [their] own conception of the problem is", it is difficult to make sense of the overall debate (Kirkman 1992 p. 1).

To better make sense of truth theories, Kirkman suggests a division between theories of truth according to the central "projects" that have guided them, which can be divided into three broad categories. Firstly, the "metaphysical project" focuses on "what truth consists in, what it is for a statement … to be true" (for example, correspondence to reality, coherence, or utility, as argued by the approaches discussed above). Here, what is important is what it is in the world that makes propositions true. Secondly, the "justification project" focuses on establishing criteria for assessing truth claims, attempting to determine the particular characteristics that true statements must possess, and how they can be validated in practice. Lastly, the "speech-act project" focuses on what purpose truth as a property serves. (Kirkman 1992 p. 20-21).

When viewed in this way, the different approaches to truth discussed above all have different strengths. Realism can account for more evident truth claims, where a statement and a fact can be reliably compared. Yet the approach does not seem to make sense for accounting for the truth-value of more interpretative statements. With moral truths, a coherence theory or pragmatist view may make more sense. Yet these approaches have trouble explaining what it is exactly that makes claims true, and how they relate to facts in the world. Relativism, in turn, has made important contributions to the understanding of the effects and purposes that the concept of truth may serve.

Another aspect that is often not clear in the debate about truth is what is meant by concepts such as objectivity and facts. All these terms are central for theories of truth, but often go without much explanation – yet the views on what these terms mean can change a whole

perspective on truth. They are also often not well-explained when talking about 'opposite' views to that of the author.

Wight (2018) points to the problem of the term 'objectivity' being used in two different ways. The first understanding of objectivity is "a process where decisions and/or judgments are based, as much as possible, on facts and not personal beliefs or feelings", and which requires attempting, as much as possible, to maintain an unbiased stance. It is more of an ideal, as absolute objectivity is probably out of reach. Rather, in this sense, objectivity is something to strive for. However, there is a second, common use of the term, where objectivity is taken to mean "something that is beyond dispute; the objective facts, for example; something beyond any and all doubt" (p. 20).

Facts, on the other hand, are conceptualized as social constructions used to describe the world and to communicate information about it. Facts are used to express a relationship between a claim and a state of the world. Importantly, they form part of language, rather than existing in their own right; "If there were no humans … there would be no facts" (Wight 2018 p. 22). Therefore, facts should not be thought of as 'objective' in the sense of something beyond dispute; they can always potentially be proven wrong by new or improved information. Yet, by definition, a fact implies some degree of certainty; "What makes something a fact is that it captures some features of the world to which it refers" (ibid p. 22). Which facts matter for a particular truth claim, however, is always open to interpretation.

3.2. Truth and democracy

Truth and democracy are closely connected in democratic theory. Habermas, for example, has argued that a "post-truth democracy … would no longer be a democracy" because truth, reason and learning are indispensable to democracy (Habermas 2006 p. 18). As was discussed above, this claim has been echoed by the EU, as well as national European leaders. President Macron, for example, declared in a speech in 2018 that "without reason, without truth, there is no real

democracy because democracy is about truth and rational decisions." He claimed that disinformation is harmful to democracy because it "exposes our people to irrational fear and imaginary risk" (cited in Farkas and Schoul 2019 p. 1).

Particularly deliberative democracy has associated democratic politics with the search for truth. In this view, free deliberation in the public sphere is the best way to ensure rational and fact-based decision-making. As a theory, deliberative democracy borrows from the work of philosopher Hannah Arendt, who argued that the concept of plurality, a fundamental characteristic of the human condition, is at the heart of democratic politics, which is about managing the inherent differences between people and their views and interests. The debate between people in the public sphere, or *polis,* is what "makes meaning and truth content possible in the first place" (Shomali 2010 p. 3). Arendt did not elaborate much on a theory of truth, but saw 'facts' as the building blocks of reality, which make it possible for dialogue to occur. According to Arendt, it is the common, shared understanding of factual reality that forms the basis on which truly free opinion formation is possible. Facts both limit and enable opinion formation and informed debate. As she stated, "[f]reedom of opinion is a farce unless factual information is guaranteed and the facts themselves are not in dispute" (Arendt 2006 p. 234).

Arendt was concerned about the tension between truth and politics. In her book *Between Past and Future*, published in 1961, she observed in political discussions a "tendency to transform fact into opinion, to blur the dividing line between them". Here, it is important to note that she differentiated factual truth from, for example, philosophical truth. Factual truth, as she explains, "is established by witnesses and depends upon testimony; it exists only to the extent that it is spoken about, even if it occurs in the domain of privacy" (Arendt 2006 p. 233-234). She considered factual truths to be the most important 'kind' of truth for politics because facts form the basis upon which opinions and explanations are formed. In other words, factual truth exists at the beginning of debate, and allows the formation of other 'types' of truth.

Linking truth and democracy has been criticized particularly by scholars adopting more relativist ideas of truth. Critically analyzing the current discourses about post-truth and democracy from a post-foundationalist perspective, Farkas and Schoul (2019) argue that equating truth and

reason with democracy leads to the argument that re-establishing democracy "means eliminating … falsehoods" (p. 5). This, they claim, is problematic from the perspective of freedom of speech as well as political plurality. For Farkas and Schoul, the essence of democracy is quite different from that of those focusing on the importance of rationality. Basing their argument around Chantal Mouffe's conceptions of democracy, they argue that:

> *"What remains proper to a well-functioning democracy is not so much its ability to navigate based on reason and truth, but its ability to include and give voice to different political projects and groups. Democracy is about different visions for how society should be organized."* (p.7)

Farkas and Schoul criticize narratives about post-truth for neglecting the fact that democracy should naturally include clashes of competing ideas. Farkas and Schoul's view on truth and democracy echoes that of Michel Foucault, who focused on the power effects of claims to truth and considered claims to truth in the political realm to be a threat to democracy. His view focuses on the way that the production of truths and facts also produces reality, and therefore, any claims about absolute truths also cement the reality in which we live, limiting the possibility of new ideas that would challenge established truths.

These views see democratic theories, particularly deliberative democracy, as having a "rationalist bias", favoring reason and rationality over other important aspects of discussions, such as emotions. According to Dahlgren (2006), this rationalist bias also tends to undervalue other modes of communication, such as artistic or humorous communication, which may be just as important for democracy as reason or rationality. However, it seems like there is no reason why competing ideas and rationality could not coexist, particularly if we see rationality as openness to criticism, learning and dialogue, as suggested by Patomäki (2002).

Another significant criticism of deliberative democracy is that it tends to ignore the fact that linguistic competency is not distributed evenly among people and therefore a free public sphere is no guarantee for all people to have their voices heard. Communicative situations are also shaped by relations of power between people. In this way, the emphasis on rationality may benefit those already in power. (Kohn 2000)

While deliberative democrats consider debate and discussion to be central to democracy, and to at least bring political decision-making closer to the truth, more skeptical views emphasize the role of vote-counting, and its implications for the role of truth in politics. According to Yack (2012), democratic processes actually undermine truth-seeking. He claims that democracy is dominated by rhetoric, which he defines as persuasion and manipulation. He claims that the basic tenant of democracy, the equal right to vote, incentivizes those running for office to speak in ways that appeal to the public through persuasion. In his view, a majority of votes is not accomplished by the most logical or rational arguments, but by those that come across as the most appealing and attractive. Rather than challenge the "commonly held premises" of the public, politicians will base their arguments on these same premises, presenting policies in terms of how they conform with "already valued practices" (p. 168). In other words, democratic decision-making actually perpetuates established practices and values, and slows the possibility of change, due to the dominant role of rhetoric (seen as strategies of pandering, manipulation etc. as opposed to logic, analysis etc.) in political speech. Legitimacy of decision-making in democracies depends on the principle of popular consent, which in turn incentivizes rhetorical competition at the expense of truthful and direct speech.

Yack's argument is that in democracies, the search for truth is undermined by "the search for some form of mutual accommodation" (p. 166). To be clear, he does not advocate for any non-democratic form of decision-making in order to fix this issue, but instead basically claims that we should accept the fact that democracy will not produce the most truthful outcomes, and a fundamental tension between truth-seeking and democratic decision-making is inevitable.

The argument made by Yack is a very common one, and theories of democracy have struggled to reconcile the commitment to democratic decision-making on the one hand and the view of the majority of people as prone to manipulation on the other. This suspicion seems to be heightened in the digital age, where endless information flows and personalized content have been seen to contribute to a "post-truth" politics. In one view, the internet is seen to have expanded the public sphere to include more people who might not have been involved in public discussions otherwise, lowering the threshold to share ideas. However, it has been argued that the already clustered and fragmented public sphere is further dispersed on the internet and

therefore, people may not actually be exposed to more difference and pluralism, but possibly less so (Dahlgren 2006).

3.3. Post-truth

In 2016, Oxford Dictionary named post-truth the word of the year. This much-cited dictionary entry defined post-truth as "circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Oxford Languages 2016 n.p.). There are a number of problems with this definition. As has been demonstrated by the earlier sections of this chapter, the concept of objective facts is by no means unproblematic, and neither is the role of emotion and personal belief in politics. Perhaps most problematically, however, as Niiniluoto (2019) points out, the term 'truth' is not mentioned at all. This is a common and significant problem with the post-truth literature; the question of what 'truth' in the term post-truth means is rarely addressed.

Particularly in the aftermath of the Brexit vote and Trump's election, there have been claims that elections are increasingly won with appeals to emotions, as opposed to fact-based information and rational debate. Writing about the phenomenon specifically in the context of Brexit, Drieschova and Marshall (2018) define post-truth politics as a "new form of politics" in which political communication intentionally seeks to provoke emotional reactions, because this kind of communication is more engaging (p. 90). According to the authors, post-truth politics has emerged because of two, interrelated factors: the changing media environment and "a growing distrust in democratic institutions, political elites, expertise, and traditional media gatekeepers" (p. 89). The article laments the loss of "respect for traditional elites and gatekeepers" and "established expert knowledge" which has made the public increasingly susceptible to believe inaccurate information that appeals to their emotions. The way that people make decisions is seen to have changed; voters in the post-truth era now "make emotionally charged and value-laden decisions" (p. 101). Drieschova and Marshall observe a clear break with the past, identifying the lies that were used to justify the US invasion of Iraq as

the turning point after which Western publics have been becoming more distrustful towards their leaders.

A similar case for conceptualizing the term post-truth in terms of a break with the past is made by Bennet and Livingston (2018) in an article that can be found in the EUvsDisinfo website's 'resources on disinformation' section. They cite the mid-to-late 19th century as the "high modern period of democracy", an era during which institutions enjoyed a high level of public trust and public authorities were seen as a reliable source of information (p. 127). They cite Eurobarometer polls showing falling trust in national parliaments and governments as evidence of a post-truth era. Similarly to Drieschova and Marshall (2018), they see lack of trust as an essential part of post-truth era, which is threatening the legitimacy of democracy. In this view, in the past, the "combination of higher trust and fewer public information sources enabled both authorities and the press to exercise more effective gatekeeping against wild or dangerous narratives from the social fringes or foreign adversaries", whereas today, the situation is much more volatile and has enabled undemocratic forms of "counter politics" (p. 128).

These arguments are very similar to those made in EU communications related to disinformation (e.g. EP 2016; European Commission 2018a). They link very closely to the idea of democratic politics being about the authority of rationality and science over emotions and personal values. They paint a picture of Western democracy as a linear path towards progress, now interrupted by a sudden and undesirable change in the public's attitudes. But this argument does not hold up when considered from a historical point, of the long history of views of the public as dominated by irrational thinking and neglecting fact-based information. Korvela (2016; 2017), for example, argues that Western political thought has throughout its history demonstrated a distrust towards the 'emotional' and 'irrational' publics who are easily manipulated to make the wrong political choices. This has been contrasted against the need for leadership based on rational, fact-based decisions. Rather than being a new phenomenon, Korvela and Vuorelma (2017) claim that particularly since 2016, the repeated shocks in international politics have caused a feeling of some kind of transformation, and the interpretation of this phenomena as a move towards a post-truth era was quickly adopted without much critical analysis. Ironically, then, the idea of post-truth can itself be seen as a

"post-truth concept"; it is based on feelings and opinions about the current moment in history, rather than reliable evidence based on a historical perspective (see also Vuorelma 2017). Korvela and Vuorelma argue that in addition to being ahistorical, what tends to be forgotten in the discussion about post-truth is that language and rhetoric have always been used in ways that are now seen as part of "post-truth" politics (deceive, threaten, anger, etc.) (p. 8).

Korvela and Vuorelma (2017) also point out that the concept of post-truth can be seen as a political act which assigns importance to the defining issue of the time – at the same time, ruling out others as less important (p. 21). The term can be used to delegitimize certain ideas and worldviews, while legitimizing others. It also creates an idea of a division between those defending truth and those defending falsehoods. Korvela and Vuorelma see the idea of post-truth as speech constructing a threatening image in which Western democracy is threatened (p. 9).

Similarly, Farkas and Schoul (2019) argue that declaring a crisis of truth "is itself a deeply political act" (p. 10). They claim that the idea of post-truth, as a "discursive formation", implies that there was once a truth era of democracy, which has been lost and has to be recovered in order for society to get back on track. A truth era, however, has never existed, and implying that it did involves "erasing long historical struggles of disenfranchised groups, such as racial minorities, to be acknowledged as part of the democratic populace" (p. 4).

It is certainly difficult to see how a 'truth era' could be considered to ever have existed; we only need to look at the history of disinformation about issues such as climate change or the production of biased, industry-funded scientific research about the health impacts of consumer products such as cigarettes, to see that the systematic production of disinformation for the purpose of manipulating the direction of public discussion as well as political decision-making is nothing new. However, as Hyvönen (2016) points out, the concept of a post-truth era does not need to make an assumption of a previous "truth era" in which truth somehow flourished. Hyvönen agrees that lies and deception have always been present in politics, but this in itself in no way means that there is *nothing* new about the current context. He argues that more important for the concept of post-truth is the seemingly increasing *indifference* towards facts

and truth. What is important here is what kind of value is given to honesty in politics and what the consequences are for being caught in lies. Here, he claims, there is a worrying tendency. Post-truth is therefore not about people being willing to believe lies, but about not even caring about truth, which has led to a situation in which increasingly, there are almost no consequences for being caught in a lie in politics. In sum, post-truth for Hyvönen is the "devaluation of factual truths in public debate", as evidenced particularly by the situation of the US, but also increasingly in other Western democracies (Hyvönen 2018 p. 48).

Hyvönen sees post-truth as a process, which can be traced back to economic and cultural factors that "erode the 'common world' and make truth increasingly irrelevant in public discourse". It is characterized by "careless speech" by politicians, defined as speech that is indifferent to the truth-value of claims as well as public deliberation, debate and engagement with other perspectives (Hyvönen 2018 p. 33). The real meaning of claims made in political speech is not only left unclear but is treated as unimportant. Careless speech does not seek to persuade, but rather to "create confusion and bring democratic debate to a halt" (p. 33). So, as he points out, his way of seeing post-truth differs from the idea of post-truth as the death of expertise or the domination of emotions over facts. Firstly, there is no prioritization of facts over emotions; "Defending truth might involve as much emotion as violating it" – so emotions and facts should not be presented as opposites in this way. Both have an important and legitimate place in public debate and democratic decision-making. Instead, Hyvönen is more concerned with the *particular uses* of appeals to emotions in politics. As has been evident in the use of lies by the Trump administration, he argues that the most "potent examples of post-truth politics" are those in which "outright lies about things that technically anyone could verify are used … for various political purposes", such as the denial of obvious or trivial matters of fact. He argues that such claims "seek to make 'normal' political debate and critical scrutiny of policies impossible" (p. 39).

The main issue here is with what Hyvönen calls "factual truths" – and particularly those factual truths that are easily verifiable. In an Arendtian view, he is concerned with the consequences of denying these kinds of facts for the ability of people to form opinions about them. He sees facts as the "immaterial infrastructure" of politics, which help define the situation in which a debate

is happening and form the basis from which opinions and views are formed. This, as he emphasizes, should not be seen as an argument for totally 'objective' facts; differing interpretations about the meanings of facts are a given. The concern over disagreement over a common basis of facts should not be interpreted, as many critics of the concept of post-truth seem to imply, as a call for "hegemonic narratives" but instead can be viewed from the perspective of ensuring pluralist debate. (Hyvönen 2016)

Similarly, Wight (2018) argues that the phenomena of post-truth does not emerge from the production of lies or disinformation, but from "the realm of reception", as publics are increasingly responding to the issue of truth-value with indifference. However, he traces the source of the problem to the social sciences itself, where postmodernism and its relativist ideas of truth have become prominent and also gained influence outside of academia. In light of this, Wight argues that the post-truth era is a kind of self-inflicted wound, resulting from the direction that the social sciences have taken in the past few decades. In this view, the ideas of postmodernism, including a suspicion or even rejection of the very notion of objective truth, are to blame for the post-truth era.

Already in 2004, before the concept of post-truth became so widely used, in an essay titled "Why has criticism run out of steam?", Bruno Latour, a long-time contributor to social constructivist theory, lamented what he saw as a misuse of the insights of the approach by "dangerous extremists" now advocating a total rejection of scientific evidence (p. 227). Latour argues that the questioning of truth in social sciences has led to a weakening of the field's own ability to critique existing knowledge and to produce new knowledge. The "lack of scientific certainty" is now made a central issue, used to undermine scientific evidence by emphasizing the fact, brought up by social scientists themselves, that all knowledge is always incomplete. This, according to him, has led to excessive distrust towards all knowledge. Relativism, which Latour himself promoted, showed that "we are always prisoners of knowledge", and that point came to be used as a basis for rejecting the whole concept of scientific evidence. But this, according to him, was never the aim. Questioning the sources and authority of knowledge, and the universality of truth, was intended to lead closer to truth. However, Latour claims that the opposite has happened; the same Enlightenment values and practices that empowered people

to debunk widely-held beliefs were "totally disarmed once matters of fact, in turn, were eaten up by the same debunking impetus" (Latour 2004 p. 228).

Niiniluoto (2019) argues that the intention of the critique of Enlightenment thinking that postmodernists are associated with was not about rejecting principles such as rationality, democracy or freedom of thought but about questioning the success with which they were achieved. Yet according to Niiniluoto, this critique brought about an "anti-truth" and nihilistic form of social constructivism in the social sciences. Similarly to Wight, he argues that these views spread from the social sciences to society, and the attitude towards truth that it advocated, combined with other features of our time like populism and social media, have led to a situation of increasing disregard for truth.

Many scholars have defended postmodern thought against this accusation, claiming that these views misunderstand the intentions of postmodern writers. Prozorov (2018), for example, separates relativism from postmodernism altogether. He claims that post-truth is mistakenly being attributed to the rise of post-structuralist and postmodern political philosophy in the 60s and 70s, which is claimed to have contributed to a suspicion towards "the authority of truth and the scientific method" (n.p.). Through an analysis of Michel Foucault's views on truth, he argues that the point was to question and contest *regimes of truth*, rather than the existence or value of truth itself. Post-truth, on the other hand, is not about "problematizing discourses of truth but rather [a] tendency to devalue truth as such, to reduce all truth to opinion, which can be neither true nor false, and whose contestation is therefore meaningless." He claims that the reduction of truth to private interests and opinion, characteristic of "post-truth political culture", is incompatible with the thought of postmodern writers such as Foucault.

Similarly, Tallis (2016) argues that the postmodern concept of truth has been hijacked, taken out of the original context of what postmodern writers meant. The problem here is not the challenging of the concept of truth, which is seen to be part of a healthy philosophical debate, but the specific ways it is being used in intolerant and cynical, aggressive ways. He claims that post-positivist (including postmodern) research "seeks to produce 'trustworthy and persuasive' knowledge about the complex and plural meanings of people's relation to their social

situations" whereas post-truth politics is about "outright lies, empirical falsehoods and misleading associations" (p. 9). This self-serving and dishonest form of politics, according to Tallis, differs completely from the attempt of postmodernists to call attention to the plural meanings of truth, the contingency of meaning and facts, in order to challenge dominant ways of thinking.

It seems difficult to deny that the postmodern claim to the relativity of truth would not have benefited the development of a 'post-truth' era in which the concept of truth and facts are neglected, yet it would be unfair to blame postmodernism itself for this. As Wight states,

> *"[w]hich facts matter, and what to make of them, is always a matter of interpretation. Thus, post-truth finds intellectual legitimation in the necessary and critical approach to the construction of knowledge that is an essential element of academia"* (Wight 2018 p. 23).

Postmodernism was right to point out the power dimension related to the concept of truth. As Tallis has argued, "perhaps the problem is not so much postmodern destabilization of 'truth'" but what has been done with that insight (cited in Michelsen and Tallis 2018). Similarly, Prozorov argues that the postmodern turn leveled "the epistemological playing field", opening access to more viewpoints challenging authority on knowledge production. While this has had positive impacts, Prozorov claims that the problem is now that "anti-progressive post-truthers" have used these important ideas for entirely different goals, closing down debate rather than opening it up and democratizing it.

Perhaps the most important concern brought up by scholars critical of the concept of post-truth is that it tends to imply a scenario where one party has authority to define what the truth is in particular matters, while the other is perceived as defying this. This point is particularly important for EUvsDisinfo as the disinformation narratives it seeks to impose are far from the type of facts that can simply be 'checked' for correspondence, such as dates or direct quotations; they are often about wider narratives and therefore always contestable.

4. Analysis

The following chapter will analyze the way that EUvsDisinfo constructs an image of the EU through the disinformation stories that it publishes and 'debunks.' This will be done through a content analysis of the disinformation cases published in the 'Disinformation Database'. The interest is on which kind of stories are flagged as disinformation, what kind of arguments are presented as evidence that the stories are false, and what kind of narratives about the EU are created or reinforced in the process.

A total of 210 publications were analyzed, with the timeline ranging from the creation of EUvsDisinfo in June 2015 to August 2020. The cases were chosen by searching for "European Union" in the Disinformation Database and discarding those cases that were not directly related to the characteristics of the EU and its institutions themselves, but instead either mentioned it in passing, or as an actor in a context where the story did not relate to the EU itself. For example, the conflict in Ukraine is very prevalent in the database and many of these cases mention the EU, but these were not included unless the stories claimed that the EU's actions during the conflict said something about the EU itself.

In the database, the disinformation cases are always presented with a title, followed by a summary of the original disinformation article, and then a "disproof" section which presents counterarguments to the story. The disinformation cases are presented as short summaries (in many cases only a few sentences long) of the original articles and are written by the staff of EUvsDisinfo. One important issue that comes up in analyzing the disinformation cases is that it is difficult to tell how accurate these summaries are without understanding the language of the original text, which are mostly in Russian. As was discussed above, the research of Hutchings and Tolz (2020), which compared these summaries to the originals, found that they are often not an accurate depiction of the original piece. However, for the purposes of this analysis, this should not present an issue, as the content of the original pieces is not relevant, as the focus is on which kinds of arguments EUvsDisinfo classifies as disinformation and how it claims to disprove them. Therefore, the summaries presented of the disinformation cases, whether

accurate or not, are an important source of information about which kinds of themes and arguments EUvsDisinfo sees as threatening to the image of the EU.

Before moving onto the specifics of the analysis, a few general observations about this database should be discussed. As has been pointed out by previous research on EUvsDisinfo as well, more often than not, what EUvsDisinfo calls debunking disinformation consists of little more than dismissing arguments as "recurring pro-Kremlin narratives" or conspiracy theories. While the following section of the analysis will focus on the cases where at least some counterarguments were presented, it is important to note that it is very common for the disproof section to offer no counterargument, and instead simply link to a section of the database with a list of similar disinformation cases, as proof that the disinformation is prevalent and belongs to a wider narrative. The idea seems to be that the fact that many similar stories are circulating in Russian media serves as evidence to disprove the claim; this point came up also in the analysis done by Hutchings and Tolz.

In the following chapter, the analyzed publications will be divided into categories based on interrelated themes that emerged from the analysis. These are arguments related to 1.) democracy in the EU, 2.) sovereignty and 3.) unity and EU integration. These themes are clearly interrelated and often overlap, but they are separated into these sections in the interest of clarity of the analysis. The main findings are summarized in Table 1, which shows the main disinformation 'themes' that emerge from the flagged disinformation cases, as well as reasons given for why they are considered disinformation. This is important because disinformation, by definition, is seen to differ from false information in general because it serves a particular, political purpose. The table also shows the narratives with which the disinformation stories are 'debunked', and the evidence given for these counterarguments.

While the term disinformation is problematic, as was discussed above, for the sake of clarity of the analysis, the 'disinformation cases' published on EUvsDisinfo will be called by that term, as it is the one used by the project.

Theme	Disinformation narrative	Why is this disinformation?	'Debunking' narrative	Evidence given
EU democracy				
Role and power of EU institutions	The EU is undemocratic; the Commission dominates decision-making; the European Parliament is weak; elections have no impact; larger states dominate	Questions the legitimacy and power of EU institutions	The EU is committed to representative democracy; EP has equal powers to the Council; member states are equal	Summarizing role of different institutions; Eurobarometer polls showing interest in EU elections in MSs
Financial elite and lobbyists	The EU is mostly about the internal market; financial elites and lobbyists rule the EU	Questions EU democracy	Power of lobbyists is regulated; The EU is committed to representative democracy	History of the EU evolving from an economic union to other policy areas; Eurobarometer surveys showing popularity of EU; EU Transparency Register; Code of Conduct for lobbying
Freedom of speech	EU policies against disinformation infringe on free speech; mainstream media in the EU are propaganda outlets	Denies existence of Russian disinformation campaigns	Freedom of speech is a core value of the EU; the West has the freest media in the world	Citing code of Practice on Disinformation; Codes of conduct, Freedom House scores
Sovereignty				
Sovereignty of member states	Member states have lost their sovereignty to the EU	Questions EU democracy	EU countries have decided to pool their sovereignty only where they have wanted to do so	Summarizing Article 4 and Article 5 of the Treaty of the EU; principle of subsidiarity
US/NATO influence	EU foreign policy is determined by the US; NATO is a US foreign policy instrument; EU is used as a tool for NATO is aggressive actions	Undermines NATO and EU's image; undermines the EU's sovereignty; presents NATO as aggressive and	The US is an important ally but does not control the EU; NATO is defensive; MSs make sovereign decisions about security	Summarizing NATO principles; summarizing the historical importance of the US in protecting Europe

		Russia as peaceful		
Unity and EU integration				
Brexit	Brexit will cause a domino effect; the EU will collapse	Seeks to discredit the EU	The EU has remained united despite problems	Eurobarometer surveys showing popularity of EU
European values	Moral decay of Europe; decline of traditional values, decline of Christianity and 'Islamization' of Europe; national identities are suppressed	Aims to portray Russia as morally superior to the West	The EU and MSs are committed to common core values and human rights; The EU respects cultures of member states	Citing Declarations and the Treaty of the EU, citing the EU's commitment to positive values
COVID-19 crisis response	Response to pandemic showed weakness and lack of solidarity; only national governments can deal with crises	Aims to pit MSs against each other; seeks to discredit the EU	The EU was essential in coordinating a crisis response; member states showed solidarity	Listing crisis response actions taken by the EU
Other internal problems	Protests show general dissatisfaction with the EU; negative reactions to immigration and multiculturalism, etc.	Seeks to discredit the EU	The EU has remained united despite problems	Eurobarometer surveys showing popularity of the EU; links to information about the EU's achievements

Table 1: Main disinformation narratives and counterarguments

4.1. Democracy in the EU

Until about February 2020, when the Covid-19 epidemic broke out and began to dominate the news cycle, the democratic qualifications of the EU was the most common theme in the dataset. Cases in this category contain disinformation stories making claims about the anti-democratic nature of the EU. They can be divided roughly into three subsections; stories

focusing on the role and power of different EU institutions; stories focusing on the domination of financial capital and lobbyists in the EU; and freedom of speech in the EU.

In the first subsection, the disinformation cases usually consist of arguments that the Commission dominates EU decision-making, that the European parliament is weak, and that policy-making in the EU generally lacks transparency and is a tool for larger states to implement their own visions at the European level. In response to accusations of an undemocratic EU, the response is usually to summarize the commitment of the EU to representative democracy. The rebuttals typically begin by claiming that the story is part of a pro-Kremlin narrative "questioning the EU institutions' legitimacy and powers"[2], with links to similar stories published on the website. The rebuttals then go on to summarize some of the main features of European elections and provide a short explanation about the role of the EP and how its powers have evolved over the history of the Union. It is often emphasized that the EP is equal in terms of decision-making power with the Council, which is presented as proof that the system is representative.

The fact that the act of questioning the EU's legitimacy and powers is considered disinformation stands out here. To anyone familiar with EU studies, the above claims will seem quite commonplace; they are all a part of ongoing, contested debates. Particularly power structures in the EU are the topic of constant discussion, debate and criticism. Regardless of what position one takes on these issues, it is troubling that according to EUvsDisinfo, these arguments are disinformation and advance pro-Kremlin narratives.

The claims about the EP being powerless relate very closely to general concerns about information war, according to which the main aim of Russian disinformation is to discourage people from voting and to lower their trust in democratic institutions. The proliferation of these ideas is seen as dangerous, as was explained in the earlier sections on hybrid threats. It is therefore no surprise that this would be one of the largest categories of EU-related cases on EUvsDisinfo. However, given that the Commission has stated that disinformation is best combated by increasing transparency of the sources of information, promoting diversity of

[2] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/eu-elections-are-a-sham/

information and enabling “citizens to make informed decisions based on critical thinking”, ensuring the credibility and quality of information, and “inclusive solutions” that include a broad range of stakeholders in society (European Commission 2018a p. 2), the methods of EUvsDisinfo seem questionable. They do not engage in critical debate or acknowledge any legitimate debate behind the claims, but instead dismiss them as pro-Kremlin and anti-EU, giving the impression that there is no room for debate about these topics. If the questioning of the legitimacy of the EU’s institutions is considered disinformation, this brings up the obvious question of, how could the EU’s democratic credentials be criticized in a way that would not be considered to be playing into the Kremlin’s hands?

In the category of domination of financial capital, the flagged stories typically argue that the financial elite and industry lobbyists rule the EU, and that decision-making favors their interests over those of the general public. These cases are actually quite rare in the database which was a surprising finding given that it is quite a common criticism of the EU.

One recent case claimed that “Europeans see the EU merely as a great market”, and that the EU is “based on neoliberal theories that posit the primacy of economics over politics, and the domination of financial capital.[3]” This ideology was claimed to ultimately aim at destroying nation-states. Besides the common “recurring pro-Kremlin narrative” claim, the disproof section goes on to summarize the history of the creation of the EU, highlighting the need to avoid conflict after the Second World War. According to the narrative, from what “began as a merely economic union”, it expanded to encompass many policy-areas. The issue of the primacy of the economy over politics, a criticism very often leveled at the EU, is not addressed in itself. The disproof section goes onto simply state that “despite the various internal and external challenges to the EU in the past years, the European sense of togetherness does not seem to have weakened”, citing a recent Eurobarometer poll.

This case brings up a problem that is very common with the disinformation cases; they often do not actually refute the argument made in the disinformation case. Instead, they list some of the

[3] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-european-union-is-merely-a-market-aims-to-destroy-nation-states-and-has-abandoned-genuine-european-values/

EU's main achievements, or tell the story of its founding. Eurobarometer surveys are also often cited as evidence that the majority of Europeans have a positive view of the EU, or that support for the EU is at a historical high, and that therefore, these different kinds of criticisms are untrue.

The actual issue of the dominance of financial capital is usually simply dismissed as a pro-Kremlin narrative and a conspiracy theory. To give another example, one case claimed that the EU was a "servant of the financial elites[4]", which is similarly debunked by labeling it a conspiracy theory, yet the concerns about lobbying are not even brought up. Instead, the counterevidence given is simply a statement that there is no "secretive financial elite" ruling the EU and that the EU is based on "the principle of representative democracy". But there is no claim of any secrecy mentioned in the disinformation case summary, so framing the disproof in this way implies the idea that the EU is subservient to financial interest is simply unreasonable or irrational. Again, the question is about a highly contested and political issue, but instead of engaging in this debate or presenting counterarguments directly related to the claim, the strategy seems to be to ridicule any such claims. As with the issue of the representativeness of EU institutions, the role of financial interests is another issue that is the topic of much academic as well as public debate. Social movements within the EU have mobilized around the issue of the power of the financial elite in the EU, and the dominance of neoliberal economic theory in the EU is a very common criticism. Yet EUvsDisinfo seems to discredit all such work and criticism as simply anti-EU (and pro-Kremlin).

Where there is a rebuttal, this typically consists of a short summary of the EU's main institutions and a statement that lobbying in the EU is regulated, citing the EU Transparency Register and the Code of Conduct for lobbying. The issue of what kind of power lobbyists hold in the EU and how lobbying may affect decision-making is not engaged with in any of the analyzed cases. For example, one case claimed that power is held by industry lobbyists who do not "identify with" Europeans, and that the EU is "about the abolition of rights to social security, employment protection and dismissal protection fought for by the labor movement.[5]"

[4] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-european-union-is-a-servant-of-financial-elites/
[5] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-lobbyists-are-real-rulers-of-the-eu/

The rebuttal states that this is a conspiracy theory and that the Code of Conduct "establishes the underlying principles for standards of behavior in all relations with the EU institutions." No reference is made to the argument about social security rights, an argument which has been prevalent in public discussions about the EU particularly in the aftermath of the euro crisis.

Issues related to the euro are not commonly published on EUvsDisinfo, but one particularly interesting case was featured on the site. The summary of the disinformation story said only the following:

> *"When Southern European countries adopted the Euro as unified currency instead of their own currency, they lost the most important banking tool that could help them achieve constant economic growth and help overcome economic crises they might face.* [6]*"*

This was labled as a common pro-Kremlin narrative used to discredit the EU, part of narratives that claim that "the Euro is responsible for the economic downfall of 'Southern' European countries" The disproof refers to the GDP growth of the Eurozone and to an IMF report that found that the "real reasons" for the economic problems of Southern member states had nothing to do with the euro (it is not said what they did have to do with). Again, a complex debate, about the effects of the euro on diverse national economies, is not engaged with at all and the criticism is brushed off as if it were a case of an easily verifiable fact.

Finally, in this category, the issue of freedom of speech in the EU comes up very often, especially in relation to responses to disinformation. The disinformation cases relating to disinformation itself often either deny that any campaigns are happening or claim that the responses taken by the EU constitute an assault on free speech. One case commented on the Commission's actions against disinformation, which were claimed to mean "censoring and telling what is true and what is not[7]". Codes of conduct agreed on with flatforms such as Facebook were presented in the disinformation cases as a war on free speech and an assault on democracy. They also commonly claim that warnings about Russian disinformation campaigns are a way to distract from the EU's internal problems. The disproof typically claims that the

[6] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/southern-european-countries-were-afflicted-by-adopting-the-euro/
[7] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/rep ort/the-european-commission-wants-to-certify-true-information/

Code of Practice on Disinformation includes an aim to facilitate the discovery and access to new sources of information, including "alternative viewpoints." It is also often stated that the EU or Western countries in general have the freest press by global standards, citing Freedom House scores.

4.2. Sovereignty

Another very common topic in the Disinformation Database is the issue of the sovereignty of EU nations. This includes arguments about both the loss of sovereignty due to the dominance of EU decision-making over domestic politics, as well as the loss of sovereignty due to the influence of the US and NATO over EU member states.

Again, what stands out most is how little information is given as 'disproof' to the disinformation claims. For example, on the topic of national governments vs. EU-level decision-making, one disinformation piece stated:

> *"Treaties signed over the past 20 years by European countries have deprived national parliaments of their sovereignty, which no longer have the economic, financial or military leverage to take autonomous decisions in their own interests.[8]"*

The disproof presented is simply: "Recurring pro-Kremlin narrative claiming that EU member states lose their sovereignty to the EU, consistent with another narrative about undemocratic EU." In other similar cases, Article 4 of the Treaty of the European Union is summarized, stating that this binds the EU to respect the sovereignty and national identities of its member states. Article 5 is also often cited, which is said to ensure "the principle of subsidiarity, which guarantees that decisions are taken as closely as possible to the citizen.[9]" Rather than having lost any sovereignty, EU member states have decided to "pool some of their 'sovereignty' in

[8] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/european-countries-have-lost-their-sovereignty-through-the-european-treaties/
[9] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/european-commission-is-highly-undemocratic/

areas where it makes sense to work together.[10]" None of the cases analyzed go into the debate about the effect of EU legislation on national legislatures or sovereignty in general, which is also the subject of considerable public and academic debate.

Most sovereignty-related arguments, however, relate to NATO or the influence of the US. Stories that claim that the EU is controlled, or at least heavily influenced by the US are very common in the Disinformation Database. Typically, they also accuse NATO of militarization and the escalation of conflicts. They are most commonly brushed off as pro-Kremlin narratives and accused of attempting to undermine NATO's image. The partnership between NATO and the EU is presented as equal and of importance, with emphasis on the fact that EU is not controlled by NATO. Some cases claim that the EU is losing confidence in NATO; the disproof claims that on the contrary, the EU is significantly expanding its mutual support with NATO, and evolving the areas of cooperation between the two. Also any claims of NATO being an instrument of US foreign policy are countered by stating that its member states are sovereign countries and all decisions are taken by consensus, so it would not be possible for it to be a foreign policy instrument.

Besides defending the EU against accusations of being controlled by NATO, it is interesting to note how much of EUvsDisinfo tells positive stories about NATO. Many NATO-related disinformation stories in the database claim that NATO's security policy is aggressive and that the focus is on security rather than peace, and the disproof sections defend NATO against these accusations[11]. Rather than provoking Russia or encircling it as many of the flagged articles state, the disproof sections state that NATO actions are only defensive. The idea that NATO could be a threat to Russia is clearly identified as disinformation and part of a pro-Kremlin narrative of a peaceful Russia and an aggressive NATO.

One NATO-related story claimed that the "realist theory of international relations dominating the USA assumes that the national interest of the state is superior to the international law and

[10] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-eu-is-an-undemocratic-neocolonial-project/
[11] For example, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/nato-an-instrument-of-us-foreign-policy-and-it-poses-a-threat-to-russia/

treaties signed with its allies[12]", and that therefore, Article 5 of NATO would only be fulfilled when it was in the self-interest of the US. This is declared to be a recurring pro-Kremlin narrative about NATO and the US, with the disproof explaining that Article 5 is critical for NATO, and that since the Second World war, "the US troops based in Europe guaranteed the security of its European allies". Increasing US military presence in Europe is because of two main threats: Russia's influence and international terrorism. But never is the realist theory about states maximizing their self-interest addressed, or the argument that the US would only protect Europe where it served its own interest (this 'self-interest' could even be defined in many very different ways).

A common theme in the database is also that the EU is losing confidence in the US or NATO. One case claimed, in its totality:

> *"Europeans always aligned with America and didn't take independent decisions. But after Donald Trump came to power, it happened so that the Americans left Europe unhappy and to its own fate, and Germany had to solve important issues on its own[13]."*

This was rebutted by repeating that member states are sovereign and make their own policy decisions, and that while the US is an important ally, it does not control the EU.

Even cases that cite US pressure or influence, rather than control, are dismissed as conspiracy theories, grouped together with the stories that claim the EU is a US puppet. Stories in the database claiming that the EU is dominated by the US often make claims about the EU being militarily and politically dependent on the US. Especially sanctions also presented as the EU simply following actions dictated by the US. Typically these arguments are rebutted by claiming that "the US is an important ally to the EU but EU policy is not determined by the US."[14] This is the response even to cases where the claim is about heavy influence, not control. They often

[12] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-usa-will-fulfill-natos-article-5-only-if-it-is-required-by-its-national-interests/
[13] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/lined-up-with-the-us-the-eu-never-took-independent-decisions/
[14] For example, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-usa-persistently-impose-to-europe-a-confrontation-with-russia/

refer to "sovereign decisions"[15] but it is not explained what exactly this means, and what effect 'influence' may have on sovereignty.

In this category also, counterarguments often do not respond to the claim made in the disinformation story. For example, to one case claiming that "the EU is a servant of US geopolitics", the disproof was that the "EU is in a prime position, when it comes to trade, as the EU is the largest economy in the world[16]", and citing high GDP, economic growth, commitment to free trade etc.

4.3. Unity and EU integration

While the stories about EU democracy were the most common in the database before February 2020, after that, the unity and integration of the EU became the most common theme in the database, as COVID-19 news started to dominate on EUvsDisinfo, too. This category includes cases that claim that different internal problems are evidence that EU member states lack solidarity with each other, or even that the Union is at the point of disintegrating. Before the pandemic, these stories mostly related to Brexit. Stories about internal problems have been particularly prevalent since the start of the pandemic, with numerous cases being published that claim that the EU's crisis response showed disunity or member states' concern with self-interest.

What is interesting with these cases is that the disinformation stories are often predictions; different problems with the EU are claimed to *lead to* its disintegration. A very common argument in the database is that Brexit would cause a domino effect of member states leaving the EU. For example, one story claimed that Brexit would be a "dangerous precedent" and the Brexit story would be unfavorable for the EU. The story claimed that *"*[c]ertain Western

[15] For example, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/lined-up-with-the-us-the-eu-never-took-independent-decisions/
[16] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/pending-check-the-eu-is-servant-of-us-geopolitics-and-nobody-takes-the-eu-seriously/

experts, political analysts predict the imminent collapse of the European Union.[17]" This story does not even claim that there definitely will be a collapse, but simply that certain experts say so. Yet it was labeled as pro-Kremlin disinformation about the EU's collapse. Eurobarometer polls showing "historically high levels" of support for the EU are cited as disproof of the claim, as well as statements of EU leaders respecting Britain's decision to leave. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that the possible future disintegration of the EU was being speculated at the time, whether or not these speculations were credible. This case shows how even quite 'mild' cases of negative views of the EU get labeled disinformation on EUvsDisinfo.

In this category, too, it is common that the disproof sections do not actually respond to a particular argument in the disinformation story, but just present those statements as pro-Kremlin, and then cite opionion polls from different member states showing high approval rates for the EU. This is especially prevalent with cases that portray Brexit as a sign of general dissatisfaction with the EU. Responses to these stories claim each time that the EU is actually very popular among the European public; not one mentions issues such as the rise in Eurosceptic parties and movements, or even the existence of any public discussion that is critical of the EU. The main argument here seems to be that since polls have found that the majority wants to stay in the EU, any claims about disintegration are disinformation. In fact, the narrative seems to imply that none of these problems related to lack of solidarity or unity exist at all.

The use of these opinion polls as evidence of popularity of the EU is also problematic because when opinion polls are cited in the flagged disinformation cases, these are considered unreliable, misleading evidence. For example, one disinformation case claimed that the idea of holding a referendum on leaving the EU is gaining popularity in other member states, too, citing a poll that showed interest in a referendum in different member states. This was labeled disinformation because the outlet, Sputnik, had carried out the poll themselves from only 5,019 people. Interestingly, the disproof also cited a poll that on the contrary found significant support for the EU – in this case, 10,000 people were polled.

[17] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/european-union-will-collapse-soon/

Another issue that stands out in its absence is the rise of Eurosceptic as well as anti-immigration movements within the EU. One disinformation story claims that the EU has failed and that "liberalism is in crisis[18]", partly due to globalization and "the negative reactions of society to multiculturalism and immigration." The counterargument is that no evidence was given for the claim, and again the Eurobarometer is cited to show that European unity has not weakened despite the challenges of the past years. There is also a link to the "EU's main achievements." Presumably, with the point about opposition to globalization and negative reactions to multiculturalism and immigration, the original story was pointing to the rise of the extreme right in Europe, yet this phenomena, which seems quite obviously related, is not addressed at all in the disproof. In fact, despite many of these disinformation stories referencing polarizing content about immigration and multiculturalism, the rise of the far-right is only mentioned in one of the cases in the dataset.

One disinformation piece claimed that December 2019 had been "rough on the EU[19]", as protests had "consumed" many of its member states. The disproof stated that this was "an exaggeration and a sensationalist narrative" which sought to exaggerate tensions. This was labeled as disinformation because it was sensationalist and exaggerating. This 'disproof' is very problematic because if an article can be labeled as disinformation due to sensationalist content, then the line between disinformation and regular, sensationalist media content is left very unclear.

Many disinformation cases also relate to defining the shared values of the EU. Many of them include arguments about a 'moral decay' of Europe, commonly referring to consumerism, the decline of family values, lack of respect for national identities and cultures, etc. The disproof given usually cite different declarations or the Treaty of the European Union and the positive values associated with it, such as respect for human rights, pluralism, freedom and democracy, with an emphasis on them being common to all Member States.

[18] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/european-union-has-failed/
[19] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/map-shows-eu-on-fire/

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, there has been a steep rise in stories in the database claiming that the epidemic revealed many weaknesses of the EU and its unity, namely lack of solidarity, as well as leadership. The delay in the reaction to the epidemic is presented in these cases as evidence of the inefficiency of a the EU bureaucracy. Member states are claimed to have been left alone to deal with the crisis. Especially border policies presented as evidence of disintegration and that ultimately, the responsibility for dealing with the crisis is on national governments rather than the EU.

According to EUvsDisinfo, the pandemic is being exploited for a narrative which aims to "pit EU member states against each other in an attempt to undermine European solidarity.[20]" Again, the responses to the claims made often repeat lists of the EU's achievements and actions in the crisis. Unlike in the earlier cases, in this section there is an acknowledgement for at least some room for criticism; it is conceded that the "COVID-19 outbreak constituted a serious challenge to Europe's readiness for a crisis", and that the Commission has "apologized for the slow response." However, overall, the argument is that the EU actually showed strength and readiness to deal with a crisis, with allegations to the contrary flagged as disinformaiton.

In this category, the disproof sections tend to go into considerably more detail than in previous cases; the rebuttals often not only include links to websites with information about the actions taken but also more detailed explanations. However, what is considered to be disinformation is just as problematic as in earlier cases. For example, one disinformation case simply stated: "The unity of Europe was dealt a serious blow by the COVID-19 epidemic. The European Union has been unable to support even its most affected countries, such as Italy.[21]" This is clearly a claim that can be argued from different sides, based on perspective, yet is presented as simply a matter of 'true vs. false' information. Rebuttals to stories claiming that the crisis has revealed the inefficiency or lack of utility of the EU argue that on the contrary, the crisis has shown "how indispensable Schengen is to the European economy and way of life[22]" – which, again, is another perspective to the issue, rather than 'disproof' to an incorrect statement.

[20] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/it-is-the-end-of-the-european-union-because-of-coronavirus/
[21] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/eu-has-been-unable-to-support-its-most-affected-members/
[2222] For example, https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-main-root-of-the-eu-was-blown-out-during-the-coronavirus/

Many stories are labeled disinformation simply because of negative adjectives used to describe characteristics of the EU. One story, for example, claimed that the pandemic has put EU's existence into question, and has made its institutions look "pathetic and helpless[23]". It was labeled disinformation because of exaggerated claims about "the inefficient governance in the EU, without providing any facts to these claims." Again, there are also many cases where predictions are labeled disinformation, such as claims that the pandemic will lead, or may lead, to the disintegration of the EU or to a rise in nationalism, etc. These are equally labeled as disinformation whether they claim that something is *likely* to happen or that it will happen.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

Much of EUvsDisinfo's work seems to be about collecting what are considered misleading, negative stories about the EU and declaring them to be a part of a recurring pro-Kremlin narrative that is intended to undermine the EU. Recently the project has been more upfront about this, as its practices have been changing since being met with criticism. For example, the sources of the flagged disinformation stories are no longer labeled 'disinformation outlets'. The website also now has a disclaimer which refers to the publications of the website as information *and opinions,* which is a change from the earlier presentation of its work as something similar to fact-checking, correcting false claims. However, despite this disclaimer, the content of the actual publications in the disinformation database has not changed.

At least in the case of disinformation stories relating to the EU itself, this is problematic given that these stories rarely deals with the type of facts that could be corrected in any objective way; rather, it is concerned with narratives. On the one hand, this goal is not denied or hidden as it is clearly stated that the East StratCom Task Force is tasked with strategic narratives, which includes presenting a positive image. On the other hand, the EEAS claims that the project is about exposing disinformation, and the strategic narrative aspect of promoting positive

[23] https://euvsdisinfo.eu/report/the-coronavirus-puts-eus-existence-into-question/

narratives about the EU is not explicit on the website. While the work of EUvsDisinfo could be seen as an attempt to rectify what it considers misleading narratives about the EU by presenting another point of view to them, this is not actually what the project claims to be doing, as it has been claimed that it is only about exposing disinformation and raising awareness of it (EEAS 2018).

EUvsDisinfo collects stories that criticize the EU or present it in a negative light and 'disproves' them with positive stories that emphasize the EU's democratic credentials and the unity among its member states. Many of the arguments flagged as disinformation are common criticisms of the EU, but they are labeled as disinformation due to their consistency with other 'pro-Kremlin' disinformation narratives. The project declares arguments related to contested and very political issues as disinformation without engaging in the debate, in quite a simple 'true vs. false' approach. A few of the cases analyzed here did include correcting more simple issues like cases that misquote claims made by EU leaders, where EUvsDisinfo links to the speech and shows that this is not what was said or points to how the interpretation of it was misrepresented. In these cases, the approach is more appropriate, because the claims can be checked against clearly corresponding facts. However, these cases are a very small minority in the dataset, and most cases are about wider narratives which arguably cannot be so easily proven true or false.

Particularly in the context of claims about disinformation as a form of hybrid warfare, this is very problematic because the implication is that particular viewpoints and opinions advance the interests of a hostile actor. As was discussed earlier, the information warfare narrative often involves a claim that even domestic actors, whether consciously or not, participate in the conflict by expressing viewpoints 'planted' by an external actor (e.g. Jantunen 2015, Nye 2018). EUvsDisinfo presents negative views about the EU as being products of such efforts to manipulate public opinion. These arguments are presented as part of campaigns to discredit the EU, which also implies that they could not form part of legitimate discussion and criticism of complex issues. Therefore, the concerns that have been raised with regard to the securitizing aspects of the 'information war' debate are very relevant to the publications of EUvsDisinfo.

EU sources claim that Russian disinformation portrays a one-sided view of issues and frames them in the interest of the Kremlin. It is hard to make the case that something similar is not being done here – disinformation stories are 'disproven' by giving an account of the same events or issues that presents the EU in a positive way, without acknowledging that there may be lack of consensus on these issues. Even very common criticisms related to EU democracy, sovereignty of member states and the EU's internal problems are grouped together with more 'outrageous' narratives, giving the impression that articulating these kinds of criticisms advances the goals of the Kremlin. The project presents some very common criticisms of the EU as a form of participation in Russian disinformation campaigns. In this sense, EUvsDisinfo could be seen as the kind of project that postmodern writers have pointed to, in which the concept of truth is used as a form of power to delegitimize particular viewpoints.

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